

JUDGES AND RUTH

THE NIV
APPLICATION
COMMENTARY

From biblical text . . . to contemporary life

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Introduction to Judges

moral and religious document but also as a basis for tribal alliances within the confederacy or league.²³

In clan ideology, it can be said fairly that the concept of abstract justice is lacking. All actions are based on specific loyalties, the lines of which are structurally determined. One supports one's fellow clansman in a dispute, regardless of moral questions. The only consideration is, "he is my fellow-clansman."²⁴ This fact concerning clan ideology is important to understand the loyalties in the case of Benjamin in Judges 19–20.

The *Hērem*

THE CONCEPT OF the *hērem* is important to understanding the book of Judges (especially the book's double introduction and double conclusion, where the term occurs). While the word is not used in the main section of the book, its concept and legal implications are present in a number of instances. The NIV usually translates the noun form as "devoted thing" and the verbal form as "totally destroy."

Although roughly 85 percent of its occurrences are in the context of warfare and destruction, its nonmilitary usage is informative. In Leviticus 27:21–29, a distinction is made between dedicating (*haqdāš*) and devoting (*habr'rim*) in that the thing dedicated can be redeemed while that which is devoted cannot. The person devoted to Yahweh must be put to death (27:28–29). According to Exodus 22:20 [Heb. 19], a person who sacrifices to any god other than Yahweh alone "must be destroyed [*h'rm*]."²⁵ This text links the *hērem* with the people's "internal identity" as Yahweh's people. Thus, the Old Testament *hērem*-narratives are stories connected with the notion of obedience/disobedience to Yahweh (i.e., the execution/nonexecution of the *hērem*).²⁶

The essential delineation of the law of the *hērem* in military contexts is found in Deuteronomy 7. The prescriptive phrases (7:1–5, 11, 16, 25) and promises (7:20–22) echo precisely the terms of Exodus 23:20–33.²⁷ The implications of the *hērem* are clearly manifest: no covenant (treaty) with the inhabitants, no mercy, no intermarriage. Its purpose according to Deuteronomy 7 is to drive out (i.e., "dispossess") the Canaanites. The reasons appear

23. Concerning the twelve-tribe systems of Israel, see Z. Kallai, "The Twelve-Tribe Systems of Israel," *VT* 47 (1997): 53–90.

24. Lambert, "Tribal Influences," 46.

25. Cf. Deut. 13, which deals with a city involved in idolatry. In this case, the property is not forfeited to the priests but is to be destroyed along with the people (cf. also Ezra 10:8).

26. See Christa Schäfer-Lichtenberger, "Bedeutung und Funktion von *hērem* in biblisch-hebräischen Texten," *BZ* 38 (1994): 270–75.

27. J. P. U. Lilley, "Understanding the *hērem*," *TynBul* 44 (1993): 169–77, esp. 174.

to be threefold: judgment of the Canaanites, protection of the Israelites from Canaanite religious influence, and fulfillment of the patriarchal promises concerning the land. In Deuteronomy 20:16–17, *ḥērem* is defined by the clause “do not leave alive anything that breathes” (referring to humans in particular).

The kind of warfare attributed to Israel in the conquest of Canaan does not originate in a theology of “holy war” peculiar to Old Testament theology. Rather, it is a political ideology that Israel shared with other nations in the ancient Near East.²⁸ All wars waged by a country were “holy wars,” dedicated to the glorification of its deity and the extension of the deity’s land and reign.

Thus the term *ḥērem* seems to connote the uncompromising devotion of things without the possibility of recall or redemption.²⁹ It was not only applied to idolatrous objects but to things that could have been taken as plunder or people who could have been enslaved. In the case of its use in connection with people, it always implies their utter destruction. It is important to note that the use of the phrase “holy war” is an inadequate description often given to the *ḥērem*.³⁰

In the book of Judges, *ḥērem* is first encountered in Judges 1:17, where it is applied by the Simeonites and Judahites in the possession of the Simeonite allotment. Deuteronomy 7 clearly provides the background to this application. While the term only occurs here in chapter 1, it is undoubtedly implied throughout the chapter by the Israelite tribes’ attempts at possessing their allotments. The failure to implement the *ḥērem* is seen in the repetition of the phrases “did not drive out” (*yāraš*) and “live among” (*yāšab*) in the assessments of the individual tribes (see discussion of chapter 1 below).

Beside 1:17, the only other occurrence of *ḥērem* in the book of Judges is in 21:11, where it is applied selectively against Jabesh-Gilead as a means of securing wives for the surviving Benjamites. Even so, the concept is present in the total annihilation of the population of Laish by the Danites and in the civil war against Benjamin (Deut. 7 again providing the background). Ironically, Laish was not in Dan’s allotment and should not have been subject to the *ḥērem* by them.

Moreover, the irony of the vow in the case of the civil war could not be greater. The Israelites were expected to *ḥērem* the Canaanites; they were not supposed to give their sons and daughters to the Canaanites. They do not do the former, and they do the latter. In the case of Benjamin, however, they

28. K. L. Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (JSOTSup 98, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 235–36.

29. Cf. Lilley’s conclusions, “Understanding the *ḥērem*,” 176–77.

30. P. C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

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ḥērem the Benjamites (if only 600 men are left, the *ḥērem* has certainly been applied!); and they vow that they will *never* give their daughters to the Benjamites. Right from the beginning of the book, the Israelites show little restraint in giving their *sons and daughters* to the Canaanites. But they tenaciously uphold their vow not to give their *daughters* to the Benjamites (a rash vow—shades of Jephthah's vow and daughter!). Note especially that the Benjamites are part of Israel, whereas the Canaanites are the real enemy.

The Structure of the Book of Judges

AS A PRELIMINARY to discussing the structure of the book of Judges, it is important to point out a basic literary assumption that the book makes. Judges assumes a basic familiarity with God's law—in particular, as contained in the book of Deuteronomy. The events recorded in Judges are interpreted and evaluated through the filter of Deuteronomy (if not more generally in the wider context of the Pentateuch as a whole). For example, the book assumes a knowledge of the *ḥērem*, of the covenant, of God's previous statements to the nation (particularly the blessings and curses of Deut. 28; cf. Lev. 26), and so on. Therefore, a close reading of the book of Deuteronomy before studying Judges is a positive move toward understanding the book.

The book of Judges has three main parts: a double introduction (1:1–2:5; 2:6–3:6), a double conclusion (17:1–18:31; 19:1–21:25), and a main section that is commonly called the "cycles" section (3:7–16:31).

The Double Introduction and Double Conclusion

THE BALANCE OF the double introduction by the double conclusion forms a type of *inclusio*.³¹ The first introduction (A) is concerned with *foreign* wars of subjugation with the *ḥērem* being applied. In its counterpart, the second conclusion (A') narrates *domestic* wars with the *ḥērem* being applied. The second introduction (B) relates the difficulties Israel had with *foreign* religious idols of the Canaanites. Its counterpart, the first conclusion (B'), describes the difficulties that Israel had with its own *domestic* idols. Thus the *inclusio* is clearly perceived as follows:

31. An *inclusio* is a literary unit that begins and ends with the same or similar word, phrase, clause, or subject matter. For the double introduction and double conclusion as an *inclusio*, see C. Exum, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges," *CBQ* 52 (1990): 410–31, esp. 413 and 429; and R. G. Boling, *Judges: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (AB 6A, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 29–38; K. L. Younger Jr., "Judges 1 in Its Near Eastern Literary Context," in *Faith, Tradition, History: Essays on Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard, J. K. Hoffmeier, and D. W. Baker (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 223–27.